

GENERAL COMMUNICATION

HISTORICAL MUSEOLOGY IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY, AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

The Northern Territory has a diverse and disparate community, comprising some 158 400 permanent residents, just under 1% of the Australian population. This community is spread over an area which is approximately one-sixth of the total continental land mass. Despite the modest size of the population and its scattered distribution, the Northern Territory has a thriving museum infrastructure of some 31 museums which includes the publicly funded Museums and Art Galleries Board of the Northern Territory. The direction of the Territory's museum industry is guided by the Board, which was established as a Statutory Authority and is accountable to the Minister responsible for Museums. This paper discusses historical museum material culture in the Northern Territory, its organisation and future directions.

KEYWORDS: Muscology, Museums, Regional Museums Programme, Material Culture, Heritage, History, Northern Territory, Australia.

INTRODUCTION

That high whig of English history, Lord Macaulay, observed:

"... of all branches of human knowledge, History is the most complicated, and in a sense includes every other department in itself." (Johnson 1930).

Museology — the science, or perhaps more accurately, the art of museum practice — mirrors the complexities noted by Macaulay. Although museums are tangible expressions of a community's culture, the administration and operation of museums are often so diffuse that the role of the museum is frequently misunderstood by the public as a whole.

The popular concept of a museum as a repository of 'interesting worthwhile things' still, in large part, holds true. However the museum is intrinsically linked to the social milieu in which it operates and it behoves both museum operators and their public to arrive at a better understanding of each others' expectations.

In fulfilling its 'repository' role museums have traditionally been perceived as somewhat remote and esoteric institutions. However in the twentieth century, and in particular since the 1940s, the profile of museums throughout the world has broadened consid-

erably. Increasingly higher levels of education, accelerated social change and increased societal wealth have altered the public's perceptions of and demands on museums.

In contemporary society it is not enough for a museum to serve as a storhouse of learned curiosities. The modern museum is obliged to provide a far broader range of services to the public than its earlier counterpart. As well as being places of research and learning, museums have become increasingly community oriented as educational resource facilities and centres for environmental and social research.

However the primary museum duty, that of acquiring, storing, researching and displaying society's material culture, remains paramount. Today's museums, whether major scientific organisations or local and cottage museums, play an important role in providing society with a sense of continuity, identity and destiny, thereby serving as a showplace for the cultural development of society.

In Australia the museum industry has made a major contribution to the development of this nation's sense of identity, and within the industry the role of the regional and local museum is well recognised:

"Local museums are important. They provide the potential for keeping his-

torical items close to their origins. They tap local enthusiasm. They provide a means for communities to explore and confirm their own identities. They are an important cultural outlet for creative and industrious citizens. They can supplement the local schools with displays of local history or natural history. They have the potential to become centres of cultural activity within the community." (Hutchinson 1985:5)

In recognition of the contribution made by the smaller museums to the cultural wealth of the community the various Australian State Museums offer a range of programmes of assistance to local museums. In line with the States, the Museums and Art Galleries Board of the Northern Territory has developed its Regional Museums Programme to service the 31 museums that presently constitute the Territory's own museum industry.

MUSEUM MATERIAL CULTURE IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

The scope of museum material culture in the Northern Territory is remarkably wide. Every regional centre has at least one museum and most of these museums reflect, in various degrees of specialisation, the particular history of the region.

What is particularly surprising about the Territory's museum industry is the quantity, diversity and quality of specialist museums included in the Regional Museums Programme. There are, for example, two aviation museums, an automobile museum, a military museum, a railway preservation museum and several museums of Aboriginal culture. These specialist museums make an important contribution to individual facets of Territory history and are extremely popular with the public.

A major weakness in the history collections of the Northern Territory is the scarcity of items of social history and domestic technology. In the Top End certainly, the pattern of European settlement tended to preclude the acquisition of such material. Because of their transient nature early settlers to the Territory did not necessarily bring with them the trappings of permanent settlement. Most of what was brought to the north was almost certainly taken back when the settlers returned south, and the little that

remained was subject to the harsh ravages of climate, cyclone and war.

This phenomenon has resulted in collections biased mainly towards industry, mining, agrarian archaeology, communications and the Second World War. To supplement its social history collection the Board has had to rely on infrequent donations or purchases from interstate or local vendors. The Museum now has a valuable and extensive Northern Territory postal history and philatelic collection, a fine lace collection, a comprehensive wireless and radiophonic collection and a burgeoning accumulation of 'Territoriana'.

It is the policy of the History Division of the Museums and Art Galleries Board to concentrate on the acquisition of major items of Territory, national or international significance which would normally be beyond the resources or context of smaller museums. Consequently the Board does not compete with regional centres whose collections reflect a specific locality with its own history. Rather the Board encourages such collections and endeavours to enhance them by suggesting inter-museum transfer of collection items to those museums which have more appropriate interests in them.

The collections of material culture held by the Programme's 31 member museums are as diverse as the museums themselves. To date there has been no cohesive regional museum collection policy and, with the exception of the specialist museums, the general collection policy of individual member museums may be described as eclectic rather than selective. Many local museums have either actively pursued, or have had thrust upon them, the policy of collecting for the sake of collecting rather than trying to establish a representative collection of material culture related to the region.

Much discussion has been held through workshops, seminars and conferences to encourage a rational museum collection policy in the Northern Territory, with professional collection from the field, proper documentation of collections and, wherever possible, mutual co-operation to increase the body of knowledge of Territory history through the medium of museum collections.

There are certain themes in Territory history that are over-duplicated in local museums. The obvious duplications are in

collections relating to the history of the Overland Telegraph Line, the mining industry and, to a lesser extent, the history of the Rev. John Flynn. Material culture relating to these themes is distributed throughout museums in the Northern Territory.

While this duplication is understandable, the excessive collection and display of such material can be tedious and unnecessary. It could be advantageous for museums to rationalise their collections in concert with other museums. In making this suggestion it is recognised and stressed that the Board in no way proposes an arbitrary policy of rationalisation which would be undesirable and certainly difficult to implement. Many of the collections contained in the museums have been donated by individuals under trust, which in itself raises a series of ethical questions as to the feasibility of transferring these items away from individual museums. Notwithstanding, in cases of duplication within the individual collection, and after appropriate discussion with the donor, it might be feasible to achieve at least a partial transference of a collection.

To date the only heritage legislation applicable to Northern Territory museum activities is the *Native and Historical Objects and Areas Preservation Act* (1980). This ordinance was the subject of considerable discussion at the 1982 Regional Museums Conference. Many delegates to that Conference deemed that this ordinance was inadequate for their needs. The legislation has since been subject to review with the objective of redefining many of its provisions for general heritage protection.

It should be noted that the role of a museum is fundamentally different from that of other heritage agencies. The museum, as a repository for society's material culture, should pursue an active collection policy with the objective of gathering under its control an adequate and representative research and display collection.

As such, the museum may on occasion conflict with other heritage agencies which argue that the intrinsic value of some items of material culture can best be preserved by leaving the item *in situ* rather than removing it to a museum. This is a matter for ongoing debate and it is highly unlikely that any hard and fast policy can be developed to cover

every contingency. It is suggested that each case should be examined on its merits.

The History Division

The History Division is responsible to the Director of the Museums and Art Galleries Board of the Northern Territory for developing and maintaining a collection of material culture that reflects the non-Aboriginal history of the Northern Territory.

The Curator of History was appointed in 1981. Until that time the functions of the museum historian had been filled, *inter alia*, by the Director. The appointment came at a time when the new Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences was nearing completion at Bullocky Point in Darwin. The History Section, as it was then known, was part of the Division of Human Sciences. Subsequently the section was excised from this Division and established as an independent Department responsible to the Director. In 1987 it became a Division in its own right.

Since 1981 the History Division, in addition to the normal ongoing administration of collections, research and fieldwork, has opened two major history museums in Darwin, upgraded and installed displays in two branch museums in Alice Springs, acquired an aviation museum in Alice Springs, prepared numerous major and minor history displays, established the Regional Museums Programme and travelled several history displays throughout the Territory.

The Regional Museums Programme

The Regional Museums Programme was initiated in late 1982, when a two-day Regional Museums Conference was organised and hosted in Darwin by the Museums and Art Galleries Board. Representatives of some 20 museums, organisations and Government bodies attended this Conference. This enabled those representatives to meet with Museum staff to discuss the establishment of a Regional Museum Programme and provided them with a basic working knowledge of museum techniques and procedures. Proceedings of this Conference were subsequently distributed and an extension service was established by the Museum to provide advice and assistance to those in immediate need of such a service.

Over the next three years Museum staff visited all member museums and offered ap-

propriate curatorial and conservation advice where requested. In 1984 a Regional Museums Field workshop visited centres from Daly Waters northwards and conducted a seminar in Katherine to discuss plans and designs for the development of the Katherine Museum. Field workshops were also held in Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs in 1986.

In April 1988 the Second Regional Museums Conference was conducted in Darwin. One delegate from each member museum was eligible for return travel and accommodation costs to enable Conference attendance, and additional delegates attended at their own expense. The three-day Conference featured lectures, talks and group discussions, conservation and display workshops, management panels and sessions on heritage strategies for museums.

A comprehensive survey of the Territory's regional museums was undertaken from 1984 to 1987. This survey was undertaken in three stages:

Preliminary Survey. Incorporating visits to all the relevant museums and basic analysis of their collections in addition to the above-mentioned Field Workshops.

Research Component. Including assessment of similar programmes throughout the country; compilation of data on NT regional museums through a survey questionnaire; reports on all Museums and Art Galleries Board Regional Museums activities; forward planning strategies associated with curatorial, conservation and display programmes and methodology for analysing future funding requirements of regional museums in the Northern Territory.

Final Report. Listing and classification of regional museums in the NT; analysis of the structural condition of museum buildings throughout the Territory, with particular reference to environmental and security requirements and recommendations for renovation or restoration work required; conservation report and strategies; regional museum display strategies and techniques; analysis of the cost effectiveness of regional museums and their educational value and contribution to both the social development of the Northern Territory and to the tourist industry.

A three-tiered classification was developed to enable the Board to determine levels

of assistance by the Board to Regional Museums:

Primary. Government and publicly funded museums and institutions. The Museums and Art Galleries Board and its branch museums are publicly funded institutions and therefore provide free access to the public. Other Government Departments also hold and display collections of material culture. To such institutions the Board is able, to the extent of its resources, to provide direct curatorial management and planning assistance and to arrange appropriate funding for conservation, display design and display production.

Secondary. Museums run by incorporated non-profit making cultural associations (National Trust, historical societies etc). To such organisations the Board is able to provide the same curatorial management services as above. However the expenditure of public monies for display purposes is limited and subject to government approval. The Board will however endeavour to represent these organisations to government in their applications for funding.

Tertiary. Museums which are privately funded, privately owned and profit making. For these the Board is unable to expend or arrange the expenditure of public monies. However it will provide, free of charge, some limited curatorial, conservation and management advice because of the importance of the collections and the recognised need to assist educational and tourist oriented bodies.

A key difference between the Northern Territory's Regional Museums Programme and similar programmes conducted elsewhere in Australia, is that all Territory museums, whether classified as Primary, Secondary or Tertiary, are automatically included in the Programme. There is no requirement for local or regional museums to qualify under formal set guidelines to be admitted to the Programme or to be eligible for appropriate levels of assistance.

Until 1986 the Regional Museums Programme was administered and effected solely by the Curator of History and staff of the Display Department. This workload placed a considerable strain on relevant staff and resources and it became apparent that it was appropriate to seek the appointment of additional staff to implement the range of activities of the Programme. Existing Museum staff were seconded to the positions of Regional

Museums Extension Officer and Graphic Designer. These staff members have enabled the Programme to provide an increasing array of services to member museums, and a regular informative Newsletter is compiled and forwarded to museums and other interested bodies.

A major goal of the History Division is the establishment of a Territory Register of Museums Collections. The objective of this Register will be to provide an accurate and detailed inventory of the material culture held in Northern Territory museums to enable future decisions on funding and protection to be made on an informed basis.

The Register will be a valuable addition to national heritage data and will also provide a means whereby insurance levels and stock-taking procedures can be established. It is anticipated that a catalogue of collections based on the Register might be published as part of the National Estate. It is not suggested that it should be mandatory for regional museums to register their collections, nor should it be considered that museums would lose their individual control over or responsibility for their collections. However, consideration may be given to guaranteeing increased protection and services from the Regional Museums Programme if individual museums participated in the Register.

The bulk of funding for Regional Museum Programme activities has been met from within the Board's annual budget as operational rather than special expenditure. Additional funding for the Programme has been provided by the Northern Territory Government's Heritage Programme.

Future Directions for Northern Territory Museums

It has always been difficult to place an accurate economic value on institutions such as museums and art galleries. Like the very notion of 'culture' itself, everybody knows they are good things, but few really know why.

As previously discussed, one of the characteristics of the social development of the Northern Territory is its inherent transience. Since Self Government in 1978 both the Northern Territory and Federal Governments have attempted to stabilise and enhance the Territory community. One of

the enabling factors in this regard has been the generous attempts by both governments to enrich the cultural wellbeing of the community through arts centres, museums, arts grants and the like. It is increasingly accepted that the arts are a positive factor in the social and economic milieu of society.

Museums, in their role as repositories of society's material culture, are an integral component in the fabric of any culture. Museum collections should serve to enhance the cultural and intellectual spirit of the community, thereby helping to imbue that community with a sense of identity and direction. It can be argued therefore that museums have an indirect cultural benefit in providing a sense of stability and continuity as well as a direct economic spin-off, usually manifested in tourism.

The Northern Territory has a relatively young, small and diverse community spread over a significant proportion of the Australian land mass. It is a community struggling to assert its own sense of identity and its role within the broader national and international context. The local museum could and should be a main cultural axis around which the local community revolves just as, on a larger scale, the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Darwin has been the venue not only for high standard displays and monthly travelling exhibitions but also for cultural performances, films and other activities.

Although it is the aim of a museum to service the community in which it is based, a not inconsequential aspect of its activities is its attraction for visitors outside that community. It is commonly accepted that tourism is rapidly becoming a major industry not only of the Northern Territory but of Australia as a whole. Records provided by all museums in the Territory indicated that in the 1985-86 year, when 651 000 tourists came to the Territory, some 960 000 individual visits were made to museums. With a projected tourism figure of 1 million for 1988-89, it can confidently be assumed that museum attendance in the Territory will certainly exceed this figure.

It is obvious from the above figures that museums provide an important and significant back-up to maintaining tourist interest while visiting the Northern Territory and also offer a background to both residents and visitors to a greater understanding of the his-

tory, culture and natural and human resources of the Territory. It is anticipated that, with ongoing and adequate support, the Regional Museums Programme will enhance the value of these resources and provide long term insurance for valuable collections that constitute the material cultural heritage of the Northern Territory.

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